

Thomas More Reader: Meditations on Death (modernized selections)

100. “Our Last Stage-play”

[From *The Four Last Things* (Scepter, 2002)]

If you were to perceive that a worthless lout playing a lord in a sideshow play was earnestly proud of wearing that showy golden gown, would you not laugh at his foolishness, considering that you know for a fact that when the play is over he will walk out a bum in his old coat? Now you think yourself plenty wise when you are proud in your player’s costume, forgetting that when your play is over you will go out as poor as that man. Nor do you remember that your pageant may happen to be over as soon as his.

101. “Two Criminals Condemned to Death”

[From *The Four Last Things* (Scepter, 2002)]

Suppose two men, both condemned to death, are being transported at the same time toward their execution. One of the two is sure that the place of his execution is within one mile, and the other’s is twenty miles off—or a hundred, if you will. The one who is in the cart to be transported a hundred miles will not take much more pleasure than his companion in the length of his way, notwithstanding that it is a hundred times as long as his companion’s and that he therefore has a hundred times as long to live, since he is sure, beyond all question, to die at the end.

Now do this for me: suppose you are a young man in your prime, twenty years of age, if you will. Say there is another man, of ninety. Both of you must die; both of you are in the cart, proceeding forward. His gallows and death stand within ten miles at the farthest, and yours within eighty. I do not see why you should think much less about your death than he should about his, even though your way is longer, since you know for a certainty that you will never cease riding till you come to it.

102. “The Dance of Death in St. Paul’s”

[From *The Four Last Things* (Scepter, 2002)]

What profit and benefit come to one’s soul from meditation on death can be seen not only in the chosen people of God, but also in such as were the best sort among gentiles and pagans. For some of the famous ancient philosophers, when asked what kind of knowledge philosophy was, answered that it was a meditation on, or an exercise of, death. For just as death makes a severance of the body and the soul when by course of nature they must needs go their separate ways, so (said they) does the study of philosophy labor to sever the soul from the love and

affections of the body while they are together.

Now, if this is the whole study and labor of philosophy, as the best philosophers said it is, then we can within a short time become very learned in philosophy. For there is nothing that can more effectively withdraw the soul from the wretched affections of the body than can the remembrance of death—if we do not remember it casually, like someone who hears a word and lets it go through one ear and out the other, without any receiving of the meaning into the heart. If we not only hear this word “death,” but also let sink into our hearts the true picture and a deep imagination of death, we shall thereby perceive that we have never been so greatly moved by the dance of death pictured in St. Paul’s as we shall feel ourselves stirred and altered by the feeling of that imagination in our hearts. And no wonder. For those pictures show only the loathsome figure of our dead, bony bodies, the flesh bitten away. Ugly as that is to behold, neither the sight of it nor the sight of all the dead heads in the charnel house, nor the apparition of an actual ghost, is half so grisly as a deeply conceived notion of death as such, graven in your own heart by a lively imagination. For there you do not see just the one plainly painful sight of the bare bones hanging by the sinews, but you see (if you visualize your own death, as by this counsel you are advised to do)—you see, I say, yourself, if you die no worse a death, yet at the least lying in your bed, your head shooting, your back aching, your veins beating, your heart panting, your throat rattling, your flesh trembling, your mouth gaping, your nose narrowing, your legs cooling, your fingers fumbling, your breath shortening, all your strength waning, your life vanishing, and your death approaching.

If you could now call to your remembrance some of those sicknesses that have most distressed you and tormented you in your days (everyone having experienced some), and you find that some one disease in some one part of your body, such as, perhaps, a kidney stone or a bladder infection, has to your own mind put you in no less torment than you would have felt if someone had stuck a knife into the same place, and that you would, as it then seemed to you, have been content with such a change, then think what it will be when you will feel so many such pains in every part of your body, breaking your veins and your nerves with so much suffering and distress, that it will feel as if as many knives as your body could receive were from everywhere entering and meeting in the middle.

A blow of a club, a cut of a knife, the flesh singed with fire, the pain of sundry sicknesses, many have personally experienced; and those who as yet have not, have at least heard something about them from those who have. But what kind of suffering and pain, what kind of grievous pangs, what intolerable torment, the poor creature feels in the dissolution and severance of the soul from the body, never yet was there a body that could tell the tale.

We can get some idea and illustration of this point from the bitter passion and piteous departing of our Savior Jesus Christ. Nowhere do we read that he ever cried on account of any pain, from either the whips and rods beating his blessed body or the sharp thorns pricking his holy head, or the big, long nails piercing his precious hands and feet. But when the point approached in which his sacred soul would depart out of his blessed body, at that point he cried loud once or twice to his Father in heaven, into whose mighty and merciful hands, at the very last point, with a big, loud cry, he gave up his soul. Now, if that death was so painful and agonizing to Christ our Savior—the joy and comfort of whose divinity, if he would have allowed it, could in such a way

have spilled over into his soul, and from there into his body, that it would not only have absorbed all his pain but also have transformed his holy body into a glorious form and made it immune to suffering—then what intolerable torment death will be to us miserable wretches, for whom the worst part of the pangs of our passage will be such painful twitches of our own conscience that fear of hell, dread of the devil, and sorrow in our heart at the sight of our sins will surpass and exceed the deadly pains of our body.

There are other things, too, which will perhaps seem no great matter to those who do not experience them, but which will be irksome beyond all measure to those who will be in that situation.

Haven't you ever, in a serious illness, found it very agonizing to have folk babble at you, and especially things that you should give some answer to, when it was painful for you to speak? Don't you think, now, that it will be a soothing pleasure when we lie dying, all our body in pain, all our mind in trouble, our soul in sorrow, our heart all in dread, while our life walks away from us, while our death draws toward us, while the devil is busy about us, while we lack the stomach and strength to bear any one of so many heinous troubles—won't it be, as I was about to say, a pleasant thing to see before your eyes and hear at your ears a rabble of fleshly kinfolk, or rather of flesh flies, skipping about your bed and your sick body like ravens around your corpse, now almost carrion, crying to you on every side, "What will I have?" "What will I have?" Then will come your children, crying for their shares. Then will come your sweet wife, and whereas when you were in good health she may have said to you not one sweet word in six weeks, now she will call you "sweet husband" and weep, with much effort, and ask you what she will have. Then your executors will ask for the keys, and ask what money is owed to you, ask what assets you have, and ask where your money is. And the whole time you lie there in that situation, their words will be so irksome that you will wish you could throw all that they're asking for onto a red fire, so you could get one half hour of peace and quiet.

103. "A Dead Man Looks Back"

[From *The Supplication of Souls* (Scepter, 2002)]

How heavily has it, do you think, gone to our heart when our evil angels have grinned and laughed and shown us our former wives so soon grown flirtatious and forgetting us, their former husbands who loved them so tenderly and left them so rich. There they sit and laugh and make merry, and do more too sometimes, with their new suitors, while our keepers cruelly keep us there in the pain of having to stand still and look on. Many times would we then speak, if we could be allowed to, and we so much long to say to her, "Oh, wife, wife, this certainly was not the pact you made, my wife, when you wept and told me that if I left you enough to live on, you would never remarry." We see there our children too, whom we loved so much, playing and singing and dancing and giving no more thought to their father's soul than to their old shoes, except that sometimes there comes out, "God have mercy on all Christian souls!" But even that comes out so coldly and with so little feeling that it lies only on the lips and never gets near the heart. Yet we sometimes hear our wives pray for us more warmly. For in quarreling with her second husband, as something to spite him with, "God have mercy," she says, "on my first

husband's soul, for he was indeed an honorable man, far unlike you." And then we are much amazed to hear them speak so well of us, for they always used to be telling us otherwise.

But when we thus find our wives or children or friends so soon and so obviously forgetting us, and see our executors snatching and grabbing things for themselves—every man catching what he can, and holding fast what he catches—and caring nothing for us, Lord God, how it grieves us that we left so much behind us and did not send here more of our substance before us with our own hands! For happy do we find those among us who sent ahead all that they could do without. And what about those who are so loath to part with anything—those who hoard up their goods and would almost rather die than break up their heap—and then at last, when they have no choice but have to leave it, suddenly repent and lack the time to dispose of it and therefore bid their friends to dispose of it well for them? Our Lord is yet so merciful that in his goodness he accepts as being done by these people the good deeds done by their executors in carrying out their intentions. And since late is better than never, our Lord somewhat approves of their attitude of wanting their goods, which they have immoderately gathered and greedily kept together as long as they could, to yet at least be put to good use at last, when they must depart from them. This attitude does please God more than would an attitude of not caring what was done with them. And therefore, as we say, God in his goodness does somewhat accept it.

106. "Christ in His Passion"

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Anthony: Surely, Nephew, as I said before, when it comes to bearing a loss of worldly goods, and suffering captivity, enslavement, and imprisonment, and gladly sustaining worldly shame, if we would on all of those points deeply ponder the example of our Savior himself, this by itself would be enough to encourage every warm-blooded Christian, whether man or woman, never to refuse to suffer for his sake any or all of those calamities. And now I say the same for a painful death. If only we could and would with due compassion conceive in our minds a right imagination and remembrance of Christ's bitter, painful Passion! Of the many terrible, bloody strokes that the cruel torturers gave him with rods and whips upon every part of his holy, tender body; of the insulting crown of sharp thorns beaten down upon his holy head, so straight and so deep that on every side his blessed blood issued out and streamed down; of his lovely limbs drawn and stretched out upon the cross, to the intolerable pain of his already sorely beaten veins and sinews; of him feeling anew, with the cruel stretching and straining, pain far surpassing any cramp, in every part of his blessed body at once. Then, of the big, long nails cruelly driven with hammers through his holy hands and feet; and of him being, in this horrible pain, lifted up and let hang with the weight of his whole body bearing down upon the painful, wounded places so grievously pierced with nails. Of him being put in such torment, with no pity but with many contemptuous insults, and suffered to be pinned and pained for the space of more than three long hours, till he himself willingly gave up to his Father his holy soul. After which yet, to show the mightiness of their malice even after his holy soul departed, they pierced his holy heart with a sharp spear, at which issued out the holy blood and water whereof his holy sacraments have inestimable secret strength. If we would, I say, remember these things in such a way as I wish to God we would, I really think the consideration of his incomparable kindness could not fail so to

in flame our stone-cold hearts and set them on fire with his love that we would find ourselves not merely content but truly glad and desirous to suffer death for the sake of him who so marvelously lovingly did not hesitate to sustain such a far more painful death for our sakes.'